

SANTOLINAS - DEPENDABLE FRIENDS

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I grow plants that suit a dry garden. Well, you do when the yearly rainfall averages 20 inches and can go as low as 14.5 inches (365mm), as it did in 1996. Add to that a poor, gravelly soil and it's only sensible to major on plants that actually like such dire conditions. But then in 2012, we had an unprecedented 34.7 inches of rain, and this past January and February [2015], over 7 inches. Unsurprisingly, some drought-adapted plants have put up their hands saying, 'Excuse me, but this is not what we were led to expect. I'm off'.

Santolinas, though, have taken it all in their stride. Even though they're not prima donnas, I value these useful stalwarts highly. Low growing, lavender-sized shrubs from the central and western Mediterranean, their colloquial name is cotton lavender, perhaps because the little bobble-like flowers are reminiscent of cotton bolls. I don't know why we don't make more of a fuss about them, they're such obliging plants.

The commonest, *S. chamaecyparissus*, was the first one I bought. It has thick, crinkled grey leaves and brash yellow bobbles. The grey foliage is fine, but those aggressively yellow button flowers do jar rather. A friend said airily, 'Oh, no problem. You simply cut them off'. Well, I'm sorry, but that's a task too far. Somehow though, it's toned down in a bed which is all greens and yellows, the only place where I find it acceptable.

Then I visited a garden and nursery which grew one with looser leaves, sporting pale yellow bobbles. Much better. Called *S. pinnata* ssp. *neapolitana* 'Edward Bowles', it was promptly bought and planted, the grey leaves and primrose flowers a delight in July, providing form and elegance.



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An unnamed santolina, thriving amongst other drought-tolerant plants in the gravel garden

However santolina names seem to be in rather a muddle, and *S. rosmarinifolia* ssp. *rosmarinifolia* 'Primrose Gem' looks remarkably similar to me, so I'm not certain they're distinct. Probably best to see a santolina before buying anyway.

There are, I discovered, a whole range of variations. With triumph I pounced on one, name unknown, with pale green leaves and cream blooms, each little bobble a beautiful study in

symmetry, with a solid centre and delicately patterned outer ring. Seedlings now appear about the garden, and I wait eagerly to see what colour combination they've inherited.

It was pleasing to come across one with intensely green leaves and yellow flowers. The names *S. viridis* or *S. virens* indicated its characteristics, which was helpful. According to the latest Plant Finder, though, both are now correctly called *S. rosmarinifolia* ssp. *rosmarinifolia*. Dear me, what goes on in the minds of taxonomists? Anyway, I planted it beside a path without realising how enormous the thing gets. Seems to grow when you're not looking, smothering everything around. Cold? Drought? Too much rain? It cares not at all.

For several years I nurtured *S. chamaecyparissus* 'Small-Ness', but eventually we gave up on each other. The thing just had no will to live. Similarly, I've not had much success with *S. rosmarinifolia* ssp. *canescens*. It has grey leaves which are much more threadlike than the others, and yellow bobbles held on long thin stalks. Whether parched and in full sun or given some shade, pruned back or left alone, the thing doesn't die. But it just never looks happy and refuses to flourish.

All santolinas seem to need some cutting back to avoid getting unattractively woody. Experience teaches which ones are masochists, responding to drastic pruning, and which, such as my nameless pale green one with white flowers, demand a much lighter touch. And when the deed is done matters, too. March is the time to prune the common *S. chamaecyparissus*. Severely, in order to keep it from getting too big, which it does if cut back in autumn.

I just can't stop admiring my latest find. Named *S. rosmarinifolia* 'Lemon Fizz', the leaves are bright yellow with blooms the same colour, and it's now the star of the gravel garden. I was afraid it wouldn't be as hardy, but it came through the unforgiving 2012/13 winter unscathed, so I needn't have worried. It just requires a mild shearing over in autumn to keep it compact, and any reverted green shoots removed.



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Santolina rosmarinifolia 'Lemon Fizz'
in the gravel garden

I wouldn't part with any of my santolinas now (well, perhaps *S. chamaecyparissus*, the one that's that's common...in all senses), they're such stalwarts, whatever the Essex weather brings.